Chapter 4
Gender, Religion and Caste

❖ Gender and Politics

- **Gender Division** refers to the discrimination against women that considers women as inferior to men and incapable of doing certain tasks considered to be the preserve of men.
- A sexual division of labour is experienced in human society. Very little contribution of women is seen in public life, especially politics.
- Political expression of gender division and political mobilisation has helped improve women's role in public life.
- Women in India face disadvantage, discrimination and oppression in various ways.
  - The literacy rate among women is only 54% compared to 76% among men. Similarly, a smaller proportion of girl students go for higher studies.
  - The proportion of women among the highly paid and valued jobs is still very small.
  - The Equal Wages Act provides that equal wages should be paid for equal work. However, in most areas of work, women are paid less than men, even when both do exactly the same work.
  - Sex-selective abortion in India has led to a decline in child sex ratio (number of girl children per thousand boys) in the country to merely 927.
  - Various kinds of harassment, exploitation and violence against women is reported in both the public and the private sphere.

❖ Women's Political Representation

- In India, the proportion of women in legislature has been very low. The percentage of elected women members in the Lok Sabha is 10 % of its total strength. Their share in the state assemblies is less than 5 %.
- Under the *Panchayati Raj* system, one-third of seats in *panchayats* and municipalities are now reserved for women.
- Women organizations and activists have been demanding a similar reservation of at least one-third seats in the Lok Sabha and the State Assemblies for women. This proposal has been pending before the government for more than a decade.

❖ Religion and Politics

- Religious differences are often expressed in the field of politics.
- Gandhi believed that religion can never be separated from politics. Most victims of communal riots in our country are people from religious minorities. They have demanded that the government take special steps for protecting religious minorities.
- Women's movement demands that the family laws of all religions should not discriminate against women.
- People should be able to express in politics their needs, interests and demands as a member of a religious community.

❖ **Communalism**

- Is based on the idea that religion is the principal basis of social community.
- Followers of a particular religion must belong to one community with the same fundamental interests.
- Communalism can take many forms in politics.
  - ➢ Religious prejudices, stereotypes of religious communities and belief in the superiority of one's religion over other religions are commonly experienced.
  - ➢ Communalism demands dominance of one's own religious community. For those belonging to majority community, this takes the form of majoritarian dominance. For those belonging to the minority community, it can take the form of a desire to form a separate political unit.
  - ➢ Political mobilization on religious lines that involves special appeal to the interests or emotions of voters of one religion in preference to others.
  - ➢ Communalism can take the form of communal violence, riots and massacre.

❖ **Secular State**

- India is a secular state because:
  - ➢ There is no official religion of the Indian State
  - ➢ The Constitution provides to all individuals and communities freedom to profess, practice and propagate any religion, or not to follow any
  - ➢ The Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion
  - ➢ The Constitution allows the state to intervene in the matters of religion in order to ensure equality within religious communities

❖ **Caste Inequalities**

- Caste division is special to India. Caste system was based on exclusion of and discrimination against the 'outcaste' groups. They were subjected to the inhuman practice of untouchability.
- With economic development, large scale urbanisation, growth of literacy and education, occupational mobility and the weakening of the position of landlords in the villages, the old notions of caste hierarchy are breaking down.
- The Constitution of India prohibited any caste-based discrimination and laid the foundations of policies for reversing the injustices of the caste system.
- Even now most people marry within their own caste or tribe. Untouchability has not ended completely, despite constitutional prohibition.

❖ **Caste in Politics**

- Caste can take various forms in politics.
  - ➢ When parties choose candidates in elections, they keep in mind the caste composition of the electorate and nominate candidates from different castes so as to muster necessary support for winning elections.
  - ➢ When governments are formed, political parties usually take care about the representatives of different castes and tribes to find a place in it.

- During elections, political parties and candidates make appeals to caste sentiment to muster support. Some political parties are known to favour some castes and are seen as their representatives.
- Universal adult franchise and the principle of one-person-one-vote compelled political leaders to gear up for the task of mobilising and securing political support. It also brought new consciousness among the low caste people.

- The Indian Constitution is however not caste biased.
  - No parliamentary constituency in the country has a clear majority of one single caste. Hence, every candidate and party needs to win the confidence of more than one caste and community to win elections.
  - No party wins the votes of all the voters of a caste or community. Caste as a 'vote bank' of one party usually means that a large proportion of the voters from that caste vote for that party.
  - Many political parties may put up candidates from the same caste (if that caste is believed to dominate the electorate in a particular constituency). Some voters have more than one candidate from their caste, while many voters have no candidate from their caste.
  - The ruling party and the sitting MP or MLA frequently lose elections in our country. That could not have happened if all castes and communities were frozen in their political preferences.

❖ **Politics in Caste**

- Each caste group tries to become bigger by incorporating within it neighbouring castes or sub-castes which were earlier excluded from it.
- Various caste groups enter into coalitions with other castes or communities and thus enter into a dialogue and negotiation.
- New kinds of caste groups have come up in the political arena such as the 'backward' and 'forward' caste groups.